

Unremembering June

BY ABBY MEGUIRE ROACH

"WHAT'S the matter with Loring? Hasn't been here for a week."

"Wife says he's pretty sick."

"Going to get back soon?"

"Beginning to fancy not."

"Any one been to see him?"

"No; just the 'phone."

"I'll go myself. It's on my way. They took him into our Blue Lodge a couple months ago."

He went into the sick-room as he did everything else—straight to the point, with vim. Not that his manner was noisy, only tense. Red-blond he was, G. W. Reno, clean-featured, square-jawed, broad-shouldered, alive.

"'Gene, Mr. Reno's come to see you."

A contralto voice, of course, from that full white throat.

The young man turned quickly in bed, "That's awful good of you," and tried to sit up.

His wife's firm hand pressed him back, while she smiled at the visitor—a smile that seemed to take him into her confidence and into some joke at the same time.

"Lie still," Reno ordered, with his usual conciseness.

"Mr. Reno didn't come to see a jack-in-the-box, 'Gene." Her manner was humorously brusque. "Don't get gay, or he'll think you might be back at work. You're not a bit smart." Her eyes had more meaning than her words; they seemed to suggest in every commonplace deeper significance and lurking fun.

Loring smiled duly. And as the back of her hand—a large, shapely hand,—in adjusting the pillow, brushed his cheek with perhaps intentional inadvertence, he turned his head quickly so that it swept his lips as well.

"No fellow ever had such a nurse before, Mr. Reno. Always joking, always doing just the right thing, never tired, and *strong!* She can lift me like a baby now, I'm so thin."

"Listen to him!" she scoffed, between pride and embarrassment. "He knows which side his bread's buttered on now!" Her hand rumbled through his hair with jocular roughness that was all tenderness.

Indeed, Reno had been looking at her. What sweet and generous plumpness! He had never before seen a woman at once so large and so dainty. And her throaty voice, her steady eyes, her unhurried yet unflagging movements,—what reserve force!

She went with him to the door, her eyes moist and shining, as she answered his inquiries with startling simplicity of acceptance. The doctors were not sure, suspected unlocated tuberculosis, did not either encourage nor discourage her. But she knew; it had been coming for a long time; she could see it now, only he never gave up till the knock-out; he would never get up again.

Even while he told her not to give up hope, and to see everything done, he felt his own banality; he might as aptly have encouraged the tide in rising.

As he passed under the window, going down a side street (Reno always found a short cut to everything), he heard the man: "Mighty clever in the boss to come himself."

And the cheerful, rich, woman's voice: "Wasn't it decent? And he says they're not needing you at the office; if you were there you'd be just loafing around getting into bad habits; so you're to make your mind easy, take this for a vacation, and get well."

As it had never occurred to Reno, and, considering Reno, never could have occurred to him, to say anything of the sort, he went smiling on his way.

"I'm tired," Loring breathed, growing suddenly heavy among the pillows. "Reno's always like a dynamo in full hum."

The atmosphere of the place he had left seemed to follow the visitor, like

perfume clinging to his clothes. An eye that had had to be trained to appraise such things, once unfamiliar, had taken in the values of the furnishings—quality, simplicity, fitness, comfort. He wondered suddenly how the salary of a mere department head could keep up so nice a cottage in so nice a neighborhood. Next morning he looked up Loring's account. It proved a couple months' undrawn salary to the good; always was, the bookkeeper said, and he added that, only a few months before, Loring had taken out quite a little accumulation for some investment.

"What a difference the right kind of a wife makes!" Reno thought, with a rush of reminiscent bitterness—bitterness that was, however, being buried deeper and deeper by a pair of little patting hands—Lola's, the daughter who had been his salvage from the wreck of his marriage.

So far Lola stood for a single predominant trait—love-hunger. Her heart was like an empty flower-cup, always held up thirstily for precious drops from heaven. She would roost all evening on the arm of his chair, her face against one cheek, her clasped fists against the other, silent, content, while he smoked (at some disadvantage, perhaps), in quizzical, tolerant affection. Reno had never begun to picture some woman filling the woman-needs of his life, domestic, social, without the presentiment of a jar in this little daily scene—a presentiment that vetoed the suggestion.

Week after week it became more evident that Loring was fighting a losing fight; and week after week it became evident also that *two* great events were ahead of the young wife. Yet her strength never seemed taxed nor her cheerfulness forced. She did all the nursing, which was constant; and when Reno or the doctor remonstrated—"But what else would I be doing? And he likes me around. And I know how he wants things." When she slept was a mathematical puzzle; yet the delicacy of her bloom never changed, nor the unflinching tenderness of her jocular roughness.

She wore always what appeared each time to be a perfectly fresh gingham shirt-waist suit; and in the warm house, even carried over into the winter, it

seemed especially personal and appropriate. Even dressed so, she was not beautiful, but stunning, smart. Reno thought he had never seen a woman who could be counted on to be so attractive at breakfast and without assistance.

She insisted on new advisers, fresh investigations, other experiments, staking everything they had saved, as quiet, game, and unswerving as a general or a gambler—and with never a line in the smooth, fresh face. When at last they told her their discovery, she looked from one to the other steadily: "You mean to tell me there is *nothing* more to be done?" For a long pause she sat looking down, the fine, capable hands relaxed in her lap. Then she moved toward the sick-room.

"You mean to tell him?"

"Why, no."

"Sure you had not better?"

"Why should I? He's comfortable and not bothering."

"But might he not want time to—to prepare?"

"Prepare? Why, there won't be anything much left, and there's only me, anyway."

As she went in, 'Gene stirred and looked at her, perhaps suspiciously. "What kept you so long, Molly-Moll?"

"Dr. Landis, with one of his stories—of the negroes on the plantation, who used to come to him drunk with malaria, and who would still go on doing anything and eating anything, with that and the medicine both to attend to. He had first to make them too sick to move before he could make them well. Besides, they were great husky fellows, not susceptible to gentleness in any form. One of them came back some time after the dosing,—'I jes wan' tell yoh, sah, dat's de stuff, whut yoh give. Yoh de doctah foh me. Why, yoh—yoh kin *kill a niggah and bring him to!*'"

"Isn't he just the patientest baby you ever saw?" she appealed to Reno, as she mothered 'Gene's helplessness. "And such grit! I tell you fighting helps. He'll win out yet."

'Gene groped for her hand and guided it to his lips with the habit of thanks. "We'll win out," he corrected. And above his closed lids she looked across at Reno, with a flush of hot tears to her eyes.

"NO FELLOW EVER HAD SUCH A NURSE BEFORE, MR. RENO."

Half-tone plate engraved by H. Lennarth



At last the doctor carried his insistence, and a nurse took the night-watch; but Molly slept opposite the door and woke to the mere dropping of medicine in water. Reno sent his carriage to give her airings after dusk. But of her own condition she seemed not only regardless, but oblivious.

Lola was hanging to her father's hand one night when he stopped.

To all inquirers Mrs. Loring responded with full details of diagnosis, assuming an equal and equally matter-of-fact interest. She talked before children as if they were not there. But her personality deodorized the unpleasant by simple unconsciousness of it.

"Won't you come in and see him?"

"Not to-night. I'm afraid my little girl might disturb—"

Molly looked down at a timid, inquiring, uplifted face. "Oh yes, of course," gruffly. "Terrible child, I'm sure! We don't want any little girls around here. What would *we* do with children?"

The child shrank sensitively. All Reno's red-blondness verified itself in instant challenge. Then he saw the double joke in the eyes at their habitual trick of laughter and allusion. And Lola, peeping up, smiled out, and was scooped up for a big hug. She talked of Mrs. Loring for weeks.

At last, one night, as Reno reached the steps, he knew. He went by several persons waiting in outer rooms, feeling himself about as unobtrusive as an automobile. The man was too vital and individual to be unremarked even in the most casual encounter; at sight he stirred interest, antagonism, admiration. In an atmosphere like this, all the more because his manner was so quiet, he had on people an effect like the knowledge of a fuse lighted to a dynamite charge. His mere presence where death was seemed abruptly contradictory.

He stopped in the doorway beside the doctor. Molly was leaning over the bed. "'Gene—oh, 'Gene! Can't you speak to me, dear? 'Gene!'"

The lids fluttered, a faint smile wavered across the face, a hint of motion guided her hand to his lips, to the ghost of a kiss. "Molly-Moll!" he breathed, and flickered out into darkness—at least for those left behind.

She bent over him, watching. At last, "He's gone," and she stood up.

But suddenly the unfailing hands trembled; she dropped back into her chair, shaking with sobs.

Reno laid a virile hand on her shoulder.

Shortly the paroxysms ceased. "There's a lot to do," she said, and turned to do it.

The young doctor's face was working. "Did you ever see such a woman? Such capacity for devotion, with such strength for endurance."

The clergyman took her hand, his manner grave, comforting, sweet. "God has left you a beautiful memory, Mrs. Loring, and the consciousness of having done everything possible under the Divine Will. Let Him be your Friend and Protector now." A sudden flutter of surprise widened her eyes, then swiftly falling lids.

Lola must needs take her flowers in person, and not for the funeral nor the dead man. Very grave and much too important to hold papa's hand, she went to make the free-will offering of a prayerful heart.

"Whose child she is I often wonder," Reno said. "Certainly not her mother's." His thin red lips gripped. "And equally not her father's." He laughed at the idea of comparison, and looking down at her, quizzical, tolerant, instinctively sheltered her with his arm.

"No?" smiled Molly. "Not a bit like you? Really?" Her look suggested that much had been left unsaid,—unthought as well. Reno sometimes caught himself wondering; and yet he was glowing now as if there was an implication, and he admitted it to be a compliment.

"And your plans?" he asked.

"I'm going back with my sister to the country. They have a farm and several children. I shall be quite welcome there so long as I need stay—" Her hand abstractedly dropped to a chubby little one lying on her knee; its instant response without motion drew her eyes to the child; and they two looked at each other deeply for a breath—a look that stabbed Reno with a dozen sweet and cruel thrills. "But of course before long I must do something. I know a little of shorthand, working with 'Gene. But to board alone in the city and with the baby—" Her breath caught almost im-



Half-tone plate engraved by Frank E. Pettit

LOLA, SILENT, CONTENT, HER FACE AGAINST ONE CHEEK

perceptibly at having spoken of it. Then she faced him steadily.

And he looked at her with clean eyes. "Never mind about business now. You mustn't think of it. Your business is to keep strong and get well. Don't worry—" He stopped, amused at himself, as often before her. The advice would have been as relevant offered to a flower. Yet to-day for the first time she looked almost sallow, the whites of her eyes faintly blue—an extreme admission for her. She had gone over and over the whole story so many times in the last few days, searching for explanations, for might-have-beens, every reminiscence an appreciation, talking, talking, with brief breaks of sobbing joined by the sympathetic caller,—as near nervousness as Molly could possibly come. "Just rest a while now; you're tired out."

"Tired? I? Why, I'm never tired. Besides, I've had three good nights' sleep since 'Gene died.'"

"And you will let me have word of you? Surely? And give me a chance to be of use? Won't you?" He persisted, taking leave. She swept his face swiftly with a glance of inquiry, intelligence. "Won't you?"

"O-h—perhaps," with just the faintest puckering of the mouth.

But spring passed without a word from her, until there were times when Reno's impatience seethed like a colony of bees at hiving-time.

At last he wrote.

With unpardonable deliberation a brief answer came: Molly's son was a couple months old—but yet not finished enough to be much to look at!

He wrote again: Lola was pale from the city, and bored with herself and her maid; a farm with other children on it sounded like fairy-land to her. Could some arrangement be made? . . .

Lola had been there a month before he had any word but her own hard-written and naturally not very voluminous love-letters; letters in which the homesickness was an ever fainter and fainter echo of the first wild cry, and in which the reference to "Dandie" made it plain that she had adopted the other children's auntie into a peculiar relationship with

herself. At last a postscript from Mrs. Loring herself: "Wouldn't you like to come to see her? It's worth a longer trip.—'DANDIE.'"

"Of course I would. You're uncommon slow asking me. What kind of father, and man, do you think me?"

Molly was standing with the baby in her arms, chewing its chub of fist. In the warm wind soft wisps of blown brown hair curled all around forehead and neck. Her flesh was firm, transparent, aglow; her skin as clear, satiny, pink, as the baby's. And what generous sweet plumpness! She was perhaps at the most beautiful time of a woman's life—in the glamour of first young motherhood, with the beauty of perfect health and uncoarsened maturity.

And in the black and white of her shirt-waist suit there was no more suggestion of mourning than there is remembrance of winter in full June—rich, warm, full of promise, unremembering June, the present and future tenses of the year's declension.

As she stood biting the baby, Reno understood why. His look devoured her.

Seeing him, her eyes only gave greeting, and, smiling, directed his to the group of animated children's overalls in a sand-pile in front of her. One particular occupant of one particular pair of overalls spied him. Lola flew! He held her off—brown, round, rosy. "Why, who is this? Whose little girl—or boy—are you?"

Her head dropped; she drooped from his hand like a nipped flower.

"Whose little girl *are* you?" coaxed a rich voice with an undercurrent of laughter.

Like a flower again, the child swayed at the breath of that elemental nature. "Dandie's little girl," ventured a small voice. At sight of the father's face Molly laughed—a laugh of many significances. And with a flood of recollected loyalty, "Papa's!" gasped the child, and smothered him with remorse.

"Wouldn't you like to be Dandie's and papa's little girl all at once?"

("Well! I like that!")

"Why, yes. Ain't I? Can't I?"

"I think you can."

("Oh, you do?")

"No?" His grip on her wrist hurt and forced her to look up—"Is it only a mother you want for Lola—and yourself?"—forced her to look up; and looking, she was satisfied; and looking, she flushed slowly from head to foot, answering him.

"The most loyal, affectionate woman in the world!" he added, after a little.

"Oh, never mind the fairy-tales!" she scoffed, pleased, waiting.

He spoke none of the time-honored commonplaces that belittle, or dignify, or mask the real individual feeling under the stereotype of what it is assumed love ought to be. He could foresee her amuse-

ment. Besides, it would have been about as appropriate as trying to capture a bird with a smile.

"But I would never marry any woman that I wasn't sure would be kind to Lola and fond of her."

"Oh, Lola!" Her whole look was soft and sweet. "I am fond of her now." Then a mischievous laugh bubbled in her throat. "And could be of you too, if you insist." Even with the laugh her eyes were deeper than the words, grave and tender.

"As to that also, Molly-Moll—what you will be to me—I am quite satisfied,—quite."